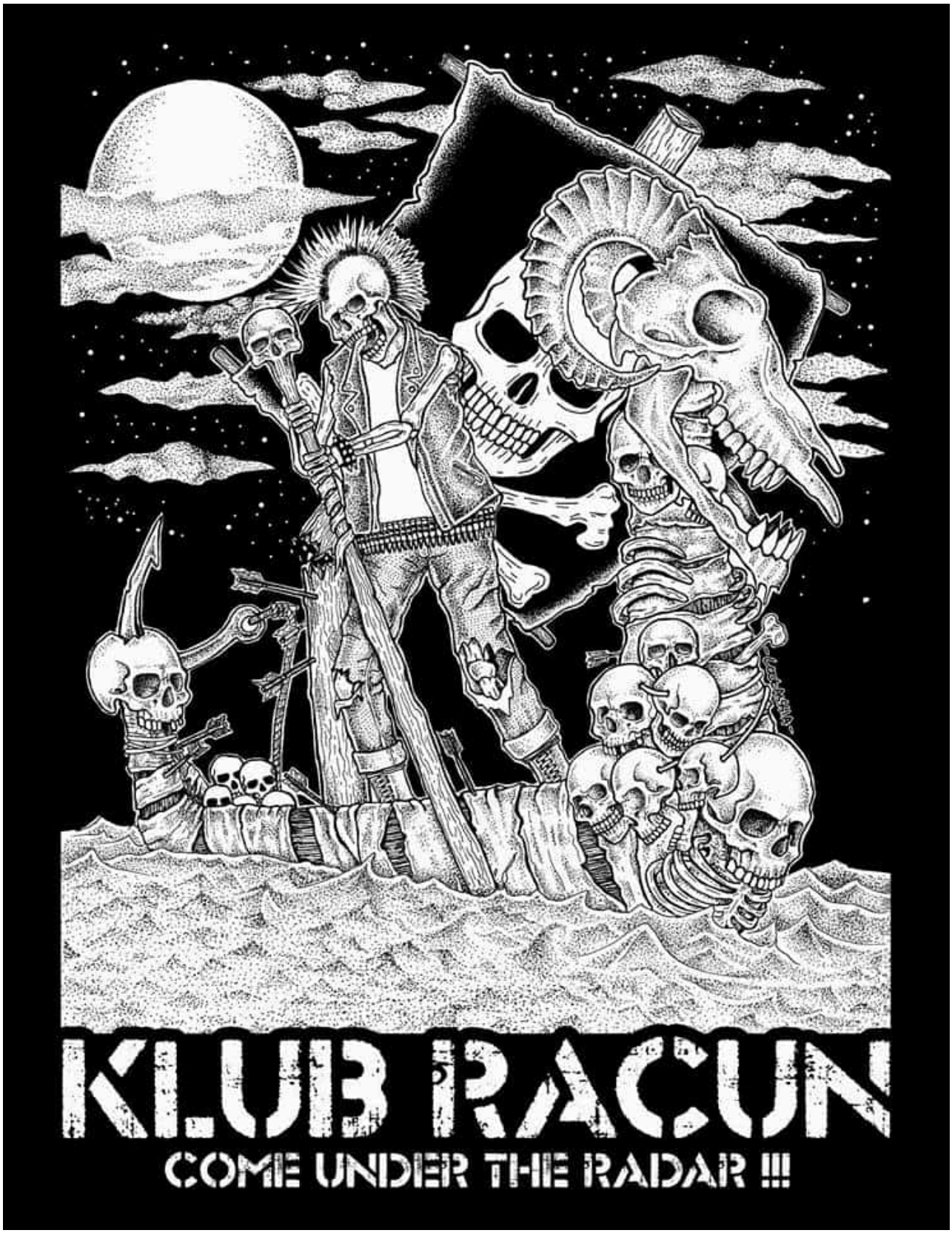
Under the Radar? The Changing Face of Repression Against Anarchism and Punk in Indonesia

A quick overview of contemporary anarchism in Indonesia and its connections with punk counter-culture and the shift in political repression in recent times.

By **Dickhead Bidge** On **Aug 5, 2021**

A narchism in contemporary Indonesia shares numerous connections with punk counter-culture. Repression against punks and anarchists has long been a problem for the movement there, but the motivations behind that repression have changed in recent years, as has the response of punk and anarchist communities to this repressive context.

This article will provide a quick overview of the historical trajectory of anarchism in Indonesia over the last century, before focusing on the re-emergence of anarchism alongside punk in the very late 1980s and 1990s. Some of the forms of repression faced by punks and anarchists will be detailed, especially the religious dimension of that repression, before charting a partial shift in the authorities' understanding of anarchism and how that has altered the form and scope of repression.



A Brief History of Anarchism in Indonesia

To set some historical context then, it is well-known that Marxism was the dominant ideology of the revolutionary Left in Indonesia throughout the first half of the twentieth century and into the 1960s, especially as manifested in the mass-movement *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI, Communist Party of

Indonesia)—this was at one point the largest Communist Party in the world that hadn't yet seized power, with several million members. However, anarchism was also a significant political strand, not least within the wider movement opposing the Dutch colonial government. Anarchism even had some influence within the explicitly Marxist PKI. In 1926, the Party's newspaper, *Api*, featured quotes from the anarchist political philosopher Bakunin on its front page, and this was such a strong influence that a leading PKI figure named Darsono insisted that members should remember that 'the Communism of Marx and not the anarchism of Bakunin must govern the party' (Benda & McVey 1960). According to Bima Satria Putra's (2018) book about anarcho-syndicalism in Indonesia in the early twentieth century, anarchist ideas have coloured Marxist and social-democratic organisations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and, in fact, differences in political ideology within the Indonesian Left were not a significant problem, because they had a common enemy in the 'invaders' of the Dutch East Indies.

It appears that this anarchist current in the PKI was successfully suppressed by the orthodox Marxists, and, indeed, anarchist-minded activists would have been able to organise independently within specifically anarchist organisations and unions. Despite the increased dominance of the PKI and Marxism over the Left towards the mid twentieth century, anarchism persisted to at least some extent within the political lexicon of Indonesia into the 1960s. It is notable that the prominent student activist Soe Hok-Gie described himself as an anarchist at that time in his correspondences with Benedict Anderson (1970), though there is no evidence of his direct involvement in any explicitly anarchist organisations.

After 1965, that all changed, of course. The installation of the Suharto regime, and the ensuing 'red scare' and murder campaign practically destroyed any Left wing political current in Indonesia, but, significantly, the persisting legal repressions against the Left specifically targeted the PKI and Marxism, or Marxist-Leninism—anarchism itself was not made 'illegal'. As such, for many years in the latter part of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century,

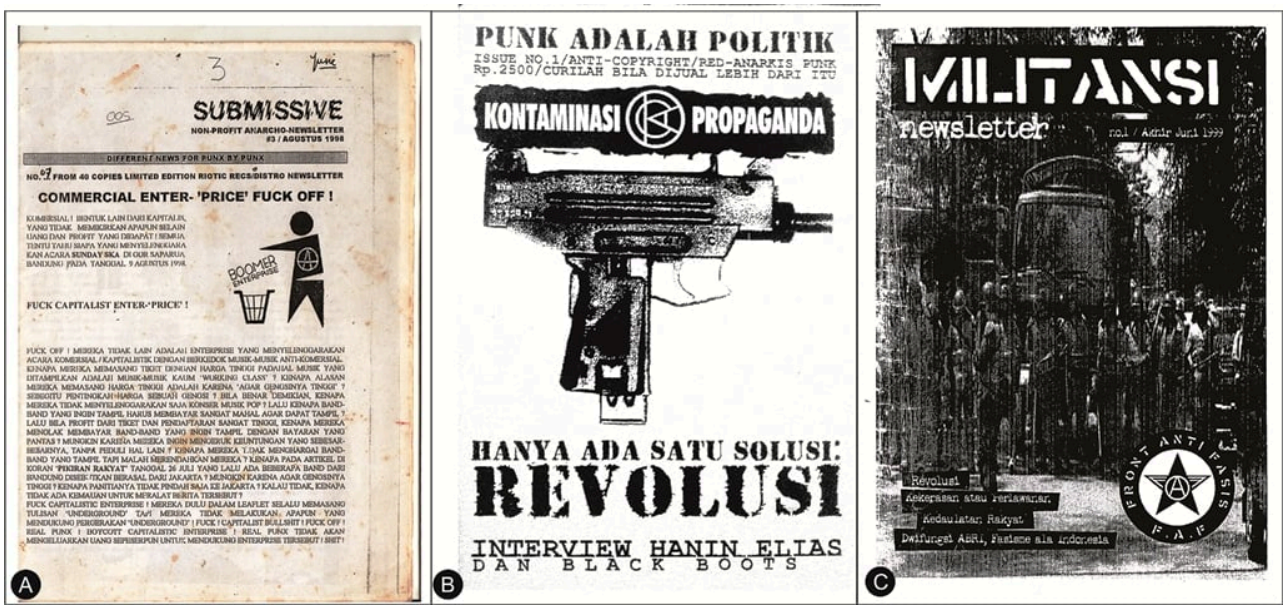
anarchism was understood by the authorities merely as a synonym for ‘chaos’ or violence, and not recognised as a Leftist political current. In some ways this hasn’t changed even now—but the picture has been complicated in recent years.

Punk and the Re-birth of Anarchism in Indonesia

The re-emergence of anarchism came a quarter of a century later, in the 1990s, with the spread of punk throughout the archipelago. Punk arrived in Indonesia in the very late 1980s, primarily through punks travelling from other places (notably the Netherlands) to Indonesia. For example, one person from the Dutch band Antidote was instrumental in sending punk records *and* anarchist literature to the nascent punk scene in Bandung (Donaghey 2016). By 1996, amidst the growing movement against the oligarchy of dictator President Suharto, the first ‘political’ punk zine in Indonesia was produced in Bandung, titled *Submissive Riot*, with others such as *Kontaminasi Propaganda* appearing in subsequent years (Prasetyo 2017).

Punks and anarchists who participated in the anti-Suharto movement framed their struggle as anti-fascist, fighting against the militarist, capitalist, and totalitarian aspects of Suharto's regime.

Indeed, the collective in Bandung responsible for producing the *Submissive Riot* zine developed into an organised group called *Front Anti-Fasis* (FAF, Anti-Fascist Front) in 1997—the zine *Militansi* was also produced by FAF.



Their activism included protests, cultural production, organising workers to take strike action at a local factory, and even taking over a government radio station to broadcast anti-Suharto messages (Donaghey 2016). After the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998, FAF joined with other anti-fascist groups across Indonesia to form *Jaringan Anti-Fasis Nusantara* (JAFNUS, the Archipelago Anti-Fascist Network)—a later group called *Jaringan Anti-Otoritarian* (JAO, Anti-Authoritarian Network) was formed in 2007.

More widely, Sean Martin-Iverson (2011) describes the post-Suharto *Reformasi* period immediately after 1998 as 'the highpoint for anarcho-punk in the Indonesian underground … emphasising a radical and disruptive form of individual autonomy against the disciplining powers of the state'. The political activism of the punk movement arguably shifted to a focus on cultural production in the ensuing post-*Reformasi* years, but as Martin-Iverson (2011) notes 'Indonesian punks [continued to] participate in class-oriented political

action, from solidarity with striking workers to participating in May Day demonstrations'—May Day protests have taken on renewed significance for the anarchist movement in recent years.

Repression of Punk and Anarchism

The creation of a new 'anti-anarchy' police division in 2011 highlighted the state's fundamental misunderstanding of 'anarchism', as inherited from the Suharto regime's narrow focus on suppressing Marxist-Leninism. This new police division was created to quell 'religious-based mob attacks' (Arnaz & Sagita 2011) and rioting by fundamentalist groups such as *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI, Islamic Defenders Front). Clearly, it had nothing to do with targeting anarchist political activists. This equating of 'anarchy' with mob violence was evident again in 2016, when rioting football fans in Jakarta were described as 'suporter anarkis' by the newly appointed chief of police, Tito Karnavian (Purba 2016)—we'll have more from Karnavian on the subject of 'anarkism' later.

This misunderstanding of anarchism does not mean, however, that anarchists have been free from repression, and, indeed, repression against anarchists has been most commonly experienced through the anarchist movement's association with punk. Punk in Indonesia has been regularly repressed because of its perceived religious contraventions—to give just two examples to illustrate this:

In December 2011, 64 punks were abducted at gunpoint by shari'ah 'Civil' police in Banda Aceh and interned for ten days at a bootcamp for religious re-education, including being dunked in a stagnant pond as part of 'cleansing' ritual, after having their heads shaved and clothes burnt. The mayor defended her actions to the international news media, insisting that '[t]he raid was necessary and would be repeated as punk constituted a "new social disease"', she said that 'punk was in conflict with the Islamic and cultural traditions of Aceh and Indonesia, and hence must be "eliminated"' (Wilson 2013).

This religious repression extends beyond the ultra-conservative province of Aceh. In 2016, the first Lady Fast feminist punk music festival was held in Yogyakarta. A group of men disrupted the festival 'shouting "Allahu Akbar" ("God is great") and accused the organisers of "corrupting morals, dressing

inappropriately [and] being communists’” (Chapelle 2016). The police stopped the mob’s attack and the festival, but then proceeded to detain the festival organisers themselves, interrogating them about the purpose of the event. The religious dimension is obvious, but so too is the continuing ‘red scare’ accusation of ‘being communists’.

So, it’s clear that political repression intertwines closely with the religiously motivated repression of punk, and by extension anarchism, in Indonesia. But, the key point is that until very recently the authorities misunderstood punk (and the anarchist movement that is closely associated with it) because they were preoccupied with the outwardly visible contraventions of Islamic doctrine, in the form of tattoos, piercings, women not wearing hijab, and so on. They failed to grasp the connections with anti-statist and anti-capitalist Leftist politics (with all the caveats for non-Leftist and post-Leftist anarchisms). Of course, this misapprehension did not protect anarchists and punks from repression, but it did likely alter the scope and form of that repression—but this is now showing signs of changing.

Resistance to Neoliberalism (and Neoliberal Policing)

The increasing influence of the neoliberal model of capitalism in Indonesia has been impactful, both on anarchist activists, and on the function of repressive policing. Despite the aspirations for a post-dictatorship social restructuring, neoliberalism (with a neocolonial flavour) has been accelerated in post-*Reformasi* Indonesia, with ‘privatisation and greater penetration by global corporations’ under the veil of ‘democratisation’ (Katsiaficas 2013). The environmental and social damage caused by this rampant neoliberalism has been a motivation for activist resistance by groups linked to the anarchist movement, and by the anarchist-associated punk scene.

Antineoliberal posters, stickers, patches and zines.

To highlight just two examples, the *Farm or Die* zine (2012), pictured here, is part of the long-running campaign against the ruinous effects of corporate iron mining in the Kulon Progo area, near Yogyakarta. The Unrest Collective produced this zine detailing the struggle of the *Paguyuban Petani Lahan Pantai* (PPLP, Society of Coastal Land Farmers) to protect native farming methods and their community, and there have been various solidarity actions in other cities as well. The *Forum Solidaritas Melawan Penggusuran* (Solidarity Forum Resisting

Eviction) in Tamansari, Bandung, in 2018 highlighted neoliberal ideology as the motivation behind the ongoing 'land grab' by the city government there, as well as identifying it as an extension of Suharto-era corruption:

"development … has now become a regime that works no differently from the New Order regime … [of] cronies, oligarchs and predators … eager to carry out the mandate of global capitalism which requires primitive accumulation […] as well as the task of carrying out the mandate of the World Bank." (Forum Solidaritas Melawan Penggusuran 2018)

In these cases, neoliberal 'development' projects are being resisted, and the police and other state forces are recognised as the enforcers of this neoliberal economic and ideological agenda.

The involvement of the anarchist movement at the forefront of this anti-neoliberal struggle, and their direct confrontation against the police as agents of this neoliberal authoritarian regime, has led to a step-change in the Indonesian state's understanding of anarchism. Having been overlooked and misunderstood by the authorities for decades, anarchist-informed activism is now on the police radar, with 'anarcho-syndicalism' specifically being denounced

in the media by Police Chief Tito Karnavian as a ‘new “ideological spectre”—alongside [Marxist-Leninist] communism and Islamic extremism’ (Needle ‘n’ Bitch Collective 2019). He called it a ‘foreign doctrine’ and an ‘international phenomenon’ and ordered ‘police personnel to map out the group’s members’ (Sani 2019). Some of the activists are indeed anarcho-syndicalists, but the movement in Indonesia is full of diverse anarchist currents—Karnavian’s use of the term is only meant to provide a veneer of specific state intelligence, and to distinguish these ‘anarchists’ from the wider ‘anarchy’ of fundamentalist mobs and football hooligans.

May Day 2019 saw significant anarchist protest actions in cities across Indonesia including Surabaya, Makassar, Yogyakarta, Malang, Jakarta, and Bandung. As evidence of the repression now faced by anarchists, during the May Day event in Bandung in 2019, police ‘arrested 619 of the estimated 1000 protesters for vandalism and destruction of public property’ who were then ‘beaten, stripped and bullied’ (Needle ‘n’ Bitch Collective 2019). They had their heads shaven and were subjected to ‘re-education’ closely echoing the shari’ah police abduction of the Aceh 64 in 2011, highlighting once again the close intertwining of religious and political repression of punk and anarchism in Indonesia.

On the Radar?

This is not to say that anarchism is now well understood by the powers-that-be, nor by scholars. An academic named Andreas Wimmer in 2014 made the absurd characterisation of contemporary anarchists in Indonesia as part of a 'growing Marxist-jihadist collaboration' (Wimmer 2014). The conflation with Marxism is at least interesting, especially considering the historical closeness in the Indonesian context, but the suggestion that anarchism is connected to jihadism is ludicrous. Wimmer, and other academics of his ilk, simply parrot the state's warped narrative instead of engaging in critical scholarship (but their bullshit writing gets published anyway!) Despite the new clarity that seemed to be marked by Tito Karnavian's identification of anarcho-syndicalism as 'a new

spectre', he returned to using the term 'anarkis' more indiscriminately just a few months later, to announce an edict repressing protests in Papua if they 'have the potential to be anarchic' (Liputan6.com 2019). So the confused misapplication of 'anarchism' by the state persists, even after the apparent watershed moment of May Day 2019.

But, despite this continued confusion from the state and academics, anarchist activists (at least when they are named as 'anarcho-syndicalists') are now explicitly repressed on political grounds and not just impacted as collateral damage in the religious repression of punk. Because of this, strategies of evasion are now more necessary for punks and anarchists. This is not a new strategy in Indonesia—punks and anarchists have long faced harassment and religiously motivated repression, and groups have established counter-cultural hubs on the outskirts of cities, or held gatherings on far-flung islands and remote mountain areas, as a means to escape this day-to-day interference and establish sustainable focal points for punk and activist organising.

So, some of this evasive strategy is voluntary, but this is not always the case. In the wake of the May Day protests and the anti-airport protests in Yogyakarta in 2018, a local anarcha-feminist collective was forced to vacate their house,

having been targeted by local cops with a concerted campaign against them in their local neighbourhood. Like other groups in other cities, they have since relocated to the fringes of the city.

This evasion may be viewed as form of ‘retreat’, but there is a ‘tactical advance’ here too in the benefits of long-term bases for networking, activism and politicisation. In any case, strategies of evasion and confrontation should not be seen as mutually exclusive. ‘Stable’ or ‘safe’ spaces that can evade repression continue to ‘nurture long-term communities of resistance’ (CrimethInc. 2009), and these counter-cultural networks underpin instances of confrontational resistance and struggle against neoliberal authoritarianism.

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Dickhead Bidge, as an anarchist vegan bike punk, ticks several of the required boxes (while railing against the squeezing of people into boxes, of course). They live in a green place where the land we call Europe meets the water we call the Atlantic.